Shared Governance: Changing with the Times

Case Study: Augsburg College
Background

In 2013, a broad range of issues coalesced to create a situation that—if left unaddressed—had the potential to undermine the long-term health and vitality of Augsburg College. An adversarial relationship had developed between the president and the leadership of the Faculty Senate (of which the president was a voting member). While the college had the decision-making structure and culture of a small, rural, liberal-arts institution, it had in fact grown into a mid-size, urban comprehensive university—and the disjunction created a sense that the institution was spread too thin and was lacking in focus. It also created “a lack of clarity around who has responsibility for which aspects of the college’s decision-making.”

Due to a shortfall in overall enrollments in fall 2012 and consequent financial constraints, there were layoffs that naturally created a pervasive sense of unease and uncertainty on campus. The Great Colleges to Work for Surveys in 2010 and 2012 revealed broad concerns about senior leadership, with a significant drop in ratings in that two-year period. The perceived slow pace of progress on the College’s capital campaign for a new Center for Science, Business, and Religion, among other issues, had led to a lack of confidence and/or trust in the president on the part of some faculty and staff.

Actions Taken

Both the president and the chair of Augsburg’s board of regents recognized that the situation required an immediate response—one that was carried out with some urgency, but, more importantly, one that engaged all of the institution’s stakeholders in a thoughtful and inclusive manner. The manner in which the board leadership collaborated with and supported the president in a very difficult situation is of particular note.

At the request of the board, the president appointed a Shared Governance Task Force in consultation with the Faculty Senate, comprising three faculty members, two members of the board of regents, and two staff members. The charge of the task force was to “engage the community in an examination of Augsburg’s existing decision-making structures and processes in light of Augsburg’s traditions and cultures and contemporary models of shared governance in higher education.”

The task force met twelve times during the 2013-14 academic year, holding 25 information-gathering sessions with over 600 participants, ranging from open all-campus meetings to focused conversations with specific groups of stakeholders. In addition, the task force received over one hundred written communications providing further input for their work.

As the task force continued their information-gathering, three important themes emerged: communication; organizational structure; and confidence and trust:

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1 Augsburg College Governance Task Force White Paper, May 2014; p. 7. The document may be found at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AItvzHaau6nXN54DfWXVAlbjhCwR2b7-tAS8U0LuazE/edit
2 Ibid., 2.
• While on the one hand there was a feeling of information overload, with a multitude of communication modes operating at the same time, there was also a sense that important decisions were communicated with too little time for useful input, or entirely after the fact.
• The administrative and decision-making structure and policies of the college—as defined in the college’s “constitutional documents”—were little changed from the 1950s and did not reflect the college’s current reality; this disjunction led to “delayed decisions, poorly communicated decisions, and lack of clarity about who is responsible for what.”
• While there certainly were faculty and staff who were supportive of the president, others expressed concerns about the president’s “ability to raise funds, spending priorities, financial management, and leadership style.”

These themes themselves reflected some other broad concerns, including: a tendency for individuals to blame others for the college’s challenges while abdicating their own accountability (a not uncommon occurrence in times of crisis), and an erosion of good-will engagement on campus—a particularly disturbing phenomenon given Augsburg’s historic roots in the Lutheran Free Church and its democratic ethos.

In May of 2014, the Shared Governance Task Force issued its report to the board of regents (a draft of the report had been circulated to campus stakeholders for input and endorsed by the Faculty Senate before it was finalized). The report included a series of recommendations for next steps that addressed each of the three areas of concern: communications, organizational structure, and leadership. The report’s recommendations included the following:

• Communications
  o Identification of and agreement on 1-2 main channels
  o Setting of clear expectations for sender and receiver responsibility
  o Development of templates for guidance on sending communications
  o “Flipped” meetings with materials sent out in advance
  o Establishment of on-line list of current projects, with opportunities for feedback before decisions are made

• Organizational Structure
  o Reorganize decision-making and governance structures to fit the current complexity of the work
  o Develop greater specialization and clarification of roles
  o Foster a more open culture of decision making
  o Blend faculty and administration at leadership level in new configurations
  o Provide training on decision making for faculty, administration, and board
  o Create clarity and transparency in decision-making authority, accountability, and reporting
  o Identify and clarify current areas of disagreement in decision-making authority

3 Ibid., 13.
4 Ibid., 17.
5 Ibid., 12.
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• Provide training in governance, including a “Guide to Governance” manual

  • Confidence/Trust in Leadership

  o Develop collaborative decision making that brings conflicting parties together
  o Agree to give each other “another chance”
  o Creation of advisory council to empower community members to share their views
  o Establishment of campus summits and/or community-wide meetings
  o Initiation of facilitated “difficult conversations” among stakeholders along lines of tension

At the same time, as the Shared Governance Task Force Report was being finalized in the spring of 2014, the board of regents implemented a new model of comprehensive review of the president that involved feedback from roughly four hundred stakeholders—a process that they plan to repeat every four to five years. The presidential assessment not only provided extremely useful information to both the president and the board, but the very fact of it had a positive impact on campus culture and morale.

Outcomes

While those interviewed for this study all emphasized that the resolution of the issues identified, and the effectiveness and appropriateness of governance and decision making at Augsburg, are still a work in progress, it is abundantly clear that the sustained, thoughtful and engaged manner in which the college took on these challenges has resulted in profoundly positive outcomes.

One of the most important formal developments was the creation of the University Council, comprising faculty, staff, administrators, and students, charged with advising the president and the board on important issues. In addition, the college now schedules a year-long agenda of “focused conversations,” an opportunity to bring the campus together to discuss and debate important issues—e.g., the planned general education reform, equity, and diversity, the impending change in status to a university. An “all-hands” planning summit every May brings the entire Augsburg community together to identify and explore strategic issues that will be institutional initiatives in the following year.

There is now a formal plan of written communications as well: the chair of the board sends a report to the campus after every meeting, and there are regular reports from the president and the provost. The faculty have responded with increased communications on their part—both among faculty themselves and with the administration and board.

Similar to the experiences of many of the institutions in these case studies, the very fact of an ongoing conversation focused on governance has strengthened the sense of shared governance, a pattern of more open communication and a healthy increase in trust and confidence across the campus. As the chair of the Faculty Senate noted, “There has been a shift in the political culture and sense of agency on campus. People have a genuine experience of having a voice, engaging in some part of the decision making. Nobody is in control of anything, but everyone can be part of the process.”

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6 Ibid., 15-16.
7 Ibid., 19.
8 The topics of the focused conversations are reflective of the University’s identified annual initiatives, which also serve as an important component of the University Council’s agenda.
It is clear that the collective efforts of the college’s stakeholders, and the commitment of the president, faculty, and board leadership, have led to significant improvements not only in the effectiveness and efficiency of decision making and governance, but in the mutual respect, trust, and confidence among the parties to governance that are essential to its success. One quantitative indicator of this progress has been a twenty percent improvement in the past two years in the scores related to institutional leadership in the *Great Colleges to Work for Survey*.

Of particular interest is the fact that while the Shared Governance Task Force was engaged in its work, Augsburg’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship was deeply involved in the work of educating and building a public culture and civic agency on campus. While independent of the task force, the Center informed the work of a number of faculty, and disseminated the concept of what it meant to be a citizen of the campus—someone who shares power with others.

**Lessons Learned**

- Building an effective shared governance model is an ongoing process that never ends, and that requires constant and consistent attention by all of the stakeholders
- The success of an integrated system of discussions and communications requires time and practice; there will be times when engagement in the process is less than optimal, and times when it can seem burdensome—it is vital for board, administrative, and faculty leadership to ensure ongoing momentum and focus
- The very fact of discussions about shared governance that are inclusive and substantive increases stakeholder engagement in and ownership of the process
- Institutions can “outgrow” their governance and decision-making structures, and a periodic review and assessment of the appropriateness and currency of these structures (as codified in by-laws, faculty handbooks, etc.) is essential
- The urgency of decision-making often required by a crisis situation can cause even the most transparent and collaborative leaders to lose sight of the need for robust communication and consultation
- Every institution will have its own unique manner of going about the work of shared governance that is embedded in its history, values, and culture
- With the sustained level of commitment, engagement, and trust on the part of presidential, faculty, and board leadership, a crisis of confidence and trust can be reversed in a manner that has deeply positive effects for the institution and for the individuals involved
- While the formal principles of shared governance historically assign authority only to the board, the president and the faculty (in most institutions only tenured or tenure-track), institutions are finding it essential to engage the voices of all stakeholders in decisions that affect the institution’s health, vitality, and future before decisions are made